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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 000010

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SUBJECT: HONG KONG JANUARY 1 DEMOCRACY DEMONSTRATION: ONE
MARCH, FOUR CAUSES

REF: HONG KONG 2377

Classified By: Acting Consul General Christopher Marut for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: Thousands of Hong Kong residents marched to the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO) January 1 to push for universal suffrage and to protest the conviction of Mainland Charter '08 activist Liu Xiaobo. While the Civic Party and the radical League of Social Democrats (LSD) claimed the march turnout as support for their plan to use legislative by-elections as a referendum on universal suffrage, the largest number of banners were for their erstwhile allies the Democratic Party (DPHK). A diverse group of organizations joined the march but largely aligned themselves with the three headline causes -- "true" universal suffrage, abolition of the small-circle functional constituencies, and freedom for Liu. The exception were protesters opposing location of a Hong Kong connection to the Mainland's national high-speed rail network through a New Territories village. A small group of young protesters championing this latter cause attempted to confront police cordoning off the CGLO, with the LSD playing an unaccustomed role in trying to stop them. Respectable in turnout, the protest suggested Hong Kong people remain motivated by the cause of democracy, but the march itself does not appear to grant a mandate to either the Civics-LSD alliance or the moderates in the DPHK and elsewhere in the democracy camp. No one believes the march itself will move Beijing to negotiate on political reform. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (C) On January 1, 2010, activists led by Hong Kong NGO Power for Democracy marched from Statue Square near the Legislative Council (LegCo) to the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO - Beijing's representative office to the people of Hong Kong) to voice support for democratic political reform and to oppose the imprisonment of Mainland Charter '08 activist Liu Xiaobo. Organizer Richard Tsoi Yiu-cheong claimed a turnout of 30,000, while Hong Kong police offered a figure of 9,000. Pan-democratic legislative caucus convener Cyd Ho Sau-lan estimated 20,000, while our own unscientific estimate would be 10-15,000.

The Four Questions

¶3. (C) The three headline causes of the march were universal suffrage (which for the pan-democrats means elections for both the Chief Executive and all sixty LegCo seats by an equal vote of all registered voters), elimination of the small-circle functional constituencies (FC), and freedom for Liu Xiaobo. Hedging their bets, march organizers preemptively co-opted anyone coming out for any other cause with the "big tent" slogan that all of Hong Kong's economic and social problems could be linked to the lack of democratically-constituted government accountable to citizens. That said, usual tagalongs like Lehman minibond

customers, migrant workers, and Falun Gong appeared to have passed on the march. While ethnic minority rights NGO Unison was on hand with a multiracial delegation, they were strictly on message, supporting universal suffrage and freedom for Liu rather than their usual range of concerns.

14. (C) The one notable exception were protesters supporting a New Territories village the government intends to relocate to make way for a rail link from Hong Kong to a PRC national high-speed rail system hub in Shenzhen. This cause has become popular with a new generation of young activists who operate outside the established NGOs and political parties (more below).

Unclear Mandate

15. (C) One of our contacts described a Hong Kong democracy protest as a wishing well -- one tosses in one's coin and takes away what one wishes. In that respect, both factions in the pan-democratic camp could join the march and claim it validated their cause. The Civic Party and League of Social Democrats (LSD) claimed the march turnout as a mandate for their plan to have five of their legislators resign so as to use the resulting by-elections (in which the legislators would run) as a "referendum" on universal suffrage. LSD Chairman Raymond "Mad Dog" Wong Yuk-man used CGLO as a backdrop to announce the five would resign January 27. While we observed a number of marchers wearing stickers supporting the "referendum," polls continue to indicate public opinion is against the plan, and pro-democracy scholars and

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commentators, including some affiliated with or close to the Civics, have all expressed opposition. In a typical general election, the entire turnout of the march would suffice to elect only one legislator in one of Hong Kong's complex multi-seat geographic constituencies.

16. (C) Whatever the Civics and the LSD claimed, the largest number of banners were for the Democratic Party (DPHK). Other than by noting the continued expressed interest of the Hong Kong people in democracy, however, it was not clear the march turnout translated directly into support for the DPHK's plan to work with pro-democracy scholars and think-tank analysts to develop an alternative to the government's draft plan for political reform in 2012 (septel).

The New Radicals

17. (C) The one breakdown in this typically peaceful protest was an attempt by young radical activists to rush the police cordon at CGLO. Police had negotiated with march leaders that twenty activists would approach the building to attempt to deliver a petition. However, the young activists attempted to push through police lines to get to the back entrance of CGLO. Ironically, it fell to LSD firebrand Leung "Long Hair" Kwok-hung, a veteran of many a tussle with the police himself, to borrow a police bullhorn to try to disperse the activists. While the activists professed support for all the causes of the day, they have most recently been the unexpected allies of the New Territories villagers.

18. (C) Contacts have pointed out a growing trend among younger activists to express their frustration about the lack of political and social progress in Hong Kong by system-rejection activism (in contrast to the "reform from within the system" ethos expressed by the established democracy movement). They use inmediahk.net as one of their rostra and social networking sites like Facebook for mobilization. Some observers have suggested the Civics' fear that this trend would lead to their marginalization helped

foment the party's hard turn towards more radical politics. The price they pay, according to one DPHK strategist, may be the loss of Civics' older middle-class base, who reject either the resignation plan or the party's alliance with the antic-prone LSD, or both.

Budging Beijing

19. (C) As reported reftel, no one expected the march itself would persuade Beijing to be more forthcoming on political reform. Most observers feel Beijing will wait to see how many seats its allies win in the coming by-elections. There is some speculation in the media about the impact the conflation of the Liu case with Hong Kong democratic reform or the scuffle at CGLO might have on Beijing's thinking, but we have not yet seen a compelling analysis of what conclusion Beijing drew regarding the march.
MARUT